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The Ancient Greek Trireme: A staple of Ancient Maritime Tradition

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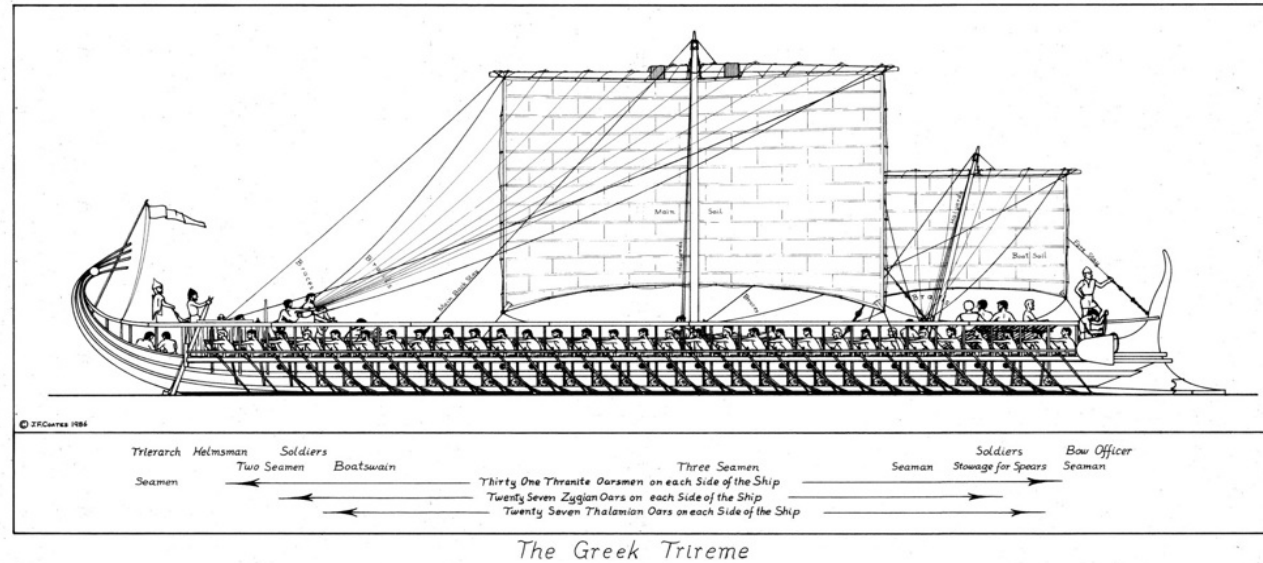
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History of the Trireme:

The Ancient Greek Trireme was a staple ship of Greek naval warfare, and played a key role in the Persian Wars, the creation of the Athenian maritime empire, and the Peloponnesian wars. The first recorded use of the Trireme in combat was in the 6th century BC, where the Greek historian Herodotus claims in 525 the tyrant Polycrates of Samos was able to contribute 40 triremes to a Persian invasion of Egypt.¹ The Trireme later became a much more popular ship, by the time of the Persian Wars in the 5th century it slowly over took the earlier two rowed Penteconter as the dominant warship in the Mediterranean. The ship saw service in combat until its crucial role in the Peloponnesian War. Following the destruction of the Athenian fleet during the Sicilian Expedition, the Mediterranean world transition from the light trireme to the heavier Pentere and Quinquereme.

The Ancient Greek Trireme: A staple of Ancient Maritime Tradition



Design and Usage of the Trireme:

A typical Greek Trireme will consist of three rows of oarsmen, situated into banks on each side of the ship. It is often noted that this three row design is the maximum that can practically be situated onto a vessel without sacrificing agility or speed. This made the Trireme extremely light and maneuverable when outfitted with a team of experienced oarsmen. The primary tactic of the Ancient Greek Trireme was to attempt to ram an enemy ship with its bronze ram, mounted on the right side of the diagram shown above. This ram, combined with the maneuverability of a Greek Trireme and the experience of an Athenian crew of oarsmen made the Trireme an extremely effective class of ship in naval combat. As time went on however, marines and naval boarding actions, ship based artillery, and missile barrages became the more effective options for naval action, thus rendering the Trireme effectively useless in comparison to the Pentere and Quinquereme, its replacements in naval action.

References

1. Herodotus; Walter Blanco, and Jennifer T. Roberts. *Herodotus: The Histories : New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. New York: Norton, 1992. Print. III.4
2. Warry, John. *Warfare in Classical World: an Illustrated Encyclopedia of Weapons, Warriors and Warfare in the Ancient Civilisations of Greece and Rome*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.
3. Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historica*, XIV.42.3

Origin of the Trireme:

The Trireme likely evolved out of the earlier Greek ships such as the earlier two decked biremes often depicted in a number of Greek pieces of pottery, according to John Warry.² These ships depicted in Greek pottery were sometimes show with or without *parexeiresia*, or outriggers. The invention of the Trireme is attributed to the Sidonians according to Clement of Alexandria in the *Stromata*. However, Thucydides claims that the Trireme was invented by the Corinthians in the late 8th century BC. These claims were later interpreted by Diodorus in his work *Bibliotheca historica* to mean that the Trireme was invented in Corinth and brought to Sidonia later. However, in this same work Diodorus still allows for the possibility that the earliest three banked warships had been developed earlier in Phoenician ports. These perhaps could have been the earliest Triremes.

